



Project
MUSE[®]
Scholarly journals online

Clinician's Corner

Polymorphously Normal Sexuality

At times, the clinician leaves his office and is fortunate enough to wend his way to the theater. One exceptional venture led him to rare enchantment. He came across so riveting a performance that it not only moved him but changed his perspective once he returned to seeing patients in his office. Ideas about gender and adolescence, gender and early infancy, gender and the delights of life were all transformed by the evening at the theater.

Adolescence is a time of glorious but painful agonies when, in the face of great uncertainties about oneself, a gender identity gels. Yet the pressure to settle that sexual identity is not the only force exploding tumultuously within the young person. For while adolescence is subject to the compelling command of both lusty and romantic desires, it is also a time when everything is thrown off balance by a tidal pull toward individuating self-definition, often manifested by a rash readiness to discard established constraints.

As gripping as are the feminine and masculine urges of adolescents and the pressure for independence, behind these remains the desire for fusion, for an oceanic unity of being, for a self fully at one with the whole human fabric and, concomitantly, for a sexuality not differentiated by gender. It is often forgotten that there is a unity that precedes individuation and a sexuality that is non-gendered but comes before both bisexuality and male/female identity. Growth does not dissolve these prior states, which continue to lie behind and alongside the later aspects more familiar to our view.

This early sexuality, one that might be called polymorphously normal (as opposed to polymorphously perverse), can nowadays be seen most easily from a distance. Shakespeare, whose breadth of view is ever astonishing, not only brings us

a mimesis of the life we know but also, awakening us from the cultural fashions of the present, reminds us of early states we have learned to obscure. It is manifest in his Protean nature and his ability to bring to life female characters who can successfully be portrayed by males.

The place of undifferentiated sexuality in Shakespeare's plays informs us of its origins in individual development. This parallel demands fresh notice, because the "progress" of civilization since Shakespeare's day has brought with it repression as well as liberation. Open recognition and appreciation of an underlying *ungendered* sexuality has become culturally hidden. Reclaiming comfortable access to such unfettered equal-opportunity sexuality enriches our understanding of our patients and ourselves, as well as of Shakespeare.

Much of the above became clear when the clinician attended (perhaps too detached a word for the engagement he actually experienced) a specific performance of an already well-known and well-loved play, *Twelfth Night*. It is a play he had read innumerable times through life's proverbial ages from school days on, one he had already seen many times produced by companies from the severely amateur to the most professionally accomplished, and one that had never ceased to delight him. But this particular performance, directed by Mark Rylance for the Globe Theatre in London, was different because all efforts were aimed at bringing the play to life in a way that conformed as closely as possible to how it would have been staged in Shakespeare's time.

Seeing *Twelfth Night* in the theater that evening amazed, raised unexpected questions, and stimulated fresh thoughts. The effect was to induce the clinician to revisit not only his sense of Shakespeare but also his understandings of sexuality and bisexuality. *It suddenly seemed clear that Freud's thinking was closer to Shakespeare's than to conventional twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century psychoanalytic thinking.* As modern discoveries and postmodern theories have turned away from drives and libido, much of great value has been left behind.

It is improbable that any single evening in the theater could change the views of someone who had attended innumerable performances of Shakespeare for more than six decades. How could a single production lead to the reevaluation of all that

had gone before? But such was the effect of a play staged as Shakespeare and his contemporaries had likely staged it, likely seen it when first it was on the boards.

The clinician, having traveled cross-country specifically to see this production of *Twelfth Night* as reincarnated by the Globe Theatre, recognized he was not alone in his reaction. Reviews and personal reports from others attested not only to the play's success but to its stunning impact on the audience. The Globe combines performances on a high artistic level with maximum historical accuracy. Costumes are replicas of those used by Shakespeare's players; the format of the performances, including the actors' dancing before and between acts, is as it was done in the original; and, of course, *males played all the parts*.

Twelfth Night, as all know, deals with lovers' struggles to come together, with sexual identity as a central theme. It is a romance, a comedy with tragedy reduced to a subplot. In the play, a union is sundered when twins are shipwrecked and separated. The sister, Viola, disguises herself as a young man to serve in the Duke's court. As the Duke's emissary and now called Cesario—an apparent man who is actually a woman (played by a boy)—Viola is sent as a surrogate to woo Olivia, who herself then falls in love with the messenger. Sexual misidentifications compound. The woman Olivia tries to seduce the messenger, the presumed man Cesario. Frustrated, Olivia asks Cesario to teach her how to woo. In response, Cesario ventures a love letter of seductive beauty, but one a woman might send another woman ("Make me a willow cabin at your gate / And call upon my soul within the house . . ."). And all unfolds with a male playing Olivia and a male playing Viola playing Cesario, the role of a woman playing the role of a man.

Masculine identities and feminine identities interact, compete, reverse, and shift. Indeed, that had been the extent of the clinician's sense of the flow until he saw Shakespeare played in Shakespeare's style. This time the emotional impact was different, and not just for the clinician; the entire audience exploded with laughter, overwhelmed with enthusiastic excitement, and at the end seemed not to want to leave the theater. Such had been the consistent response to other performances of this staging in cities across the international tour, both in England and in America. The effect led the clinician to think anew about individual sexuality.

Psychoanalysts know that a large part of the appeal of young adolescents to more mature adults is their bisexuality. What had engulfed the audience was not merely a flow of male and female identities but also an easy unboundaried open sensuality. When Freud first saw this quality clinically, he called it polymorphous perversity. Shakespeare's play brought to life as it was in Shakespeare's own time awakened appreciation of the developmentally normal nature of such diffusion at the core of sexuality. This mutable sensuality that was more safely open in a truly Shakespearean production and more readily accepted and enjoyed in Shakespeare's time suggests the simultaneous presence of three levels of sexual functioning: (1) gendered sexuality, (2) bisexuality, and (3) ungendered protean sexuality.

Analysts know well the infinite varieties of individual male and female sexuality. Analysts also know bisexuality, the presence of mixed male and female characteristics in any individual. What unfolded now was recognition of a diffuse sexuality that was not separated into male and female aspects. Rather, it was a *not-yet-gendered* rush for sensual excitement, for stimulation and satisfaction, an exhilarated urge for both thrill and union that is fluid and indifferent to gender. Sensuality blossoming but not yet shaped or even outlined. (In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, this diffuse early sensuality is indifferent to species as well as to gender barriers.)

An audience led to set aside the restraints of modernity quickly realized another reason Shakespeare's plays were so popular in his day. They played to an audience unencumbered by the burden of modern shame. Shakespeare's bawdiness caught the temper of the times, a human temper now more constrained by modern mind-sets of masculine and feminine delineation. Yes, such forces clearly are also present in Shakespeare, but beyond them much in the plays is made of erotic attraction indifferent to gender, lust for its own expansive delight.

A male playing a female character on the stage could be appreciated as being male, as being female, as being mixed male and female, and as personifying the lightness of sexual excitement unweighted by gender. Undifferentiated primordial sexual excitement, early libido, is an innate emotional drive constituent of the oceanic oneness that is part of human psychic reality. Behind heterosexuality and homosexuality and

their various permutations lies a core of earliest polymorphous sensual and sexual enthusiasm.

*5225 Connecticut Ave.
Washington, D.C. 20015
warrenpoland@verizon.net*